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PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHLN RUEHMA RUEHNH RUEHPB
DE RUEHPF #1088/01 1601036
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 091036Z JUN 06
FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6835
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1474

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 001088

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, OES/PCI AND OES/ETC
STATE PLEASE PASS TO USAID FOR ANE/SPOTS--MARY MELNYK AND
JOHN WILSON, ANE/ESA--DEIDRE WINSTON AND DEBORAH
KENNEDY--IRAHETA
GENEVA FOR RMA
BANGKOK FOR REO--JIM WALLER AND DAN KIEFER

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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA: ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERS HIGHLIGHT TOP
CONCERNS

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Environmental leaders cited land degradation and encroachment on protected areas as Cambodia's most pressing environmental concerns during a June 7 roundtable discussion. Wildlife traffickers seem to operate in small, decentralized networks with Vietnam as either a destination or a transit point en route to China. Efforts to improve environmental protection are thwarted by government inefficiency, lack of political will, and corruption. While often overshadowed by arguably more pressing issues like rule of law and poverty alleviation, in fact weaknesses in all three areas are mutually reinforcing and the issues must be addressed simultaneously if progress is to be made. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Poleconoff hosted an environmental roundtable discussion and reception on June 7 to introduce the new USAID Economic Development and Environment Officer. Ten environmental leaders, representing seven local and international NGOs, attended the event and presented a snapshot of the environmental conditions in Cambodia.

Land Degradation and Forest Encroachment Most Alarming

3. (U) Nearly everyone present cited land degradation and the encroachment of formally protected and/or environmentally sensitive areas as the top environmental concern in Cambodia. Edward Pollard of the Wildlife Conservation Society described two distinct patterns of encroachment: small-scale encroachment due to migration from the more heavily populated lowlands to less densely populated, environmentally sensitive areas, and large-scale destruction associated with land concessions, commercial agricultural plantations, and illegal logging.

4. (SBU) Land degradation and poverty are closely tied, activists noted. Sam Inn of the Lutheran World Federation noted that the poor often turn to environmentally-destructive practices like collecting fuel wood and producing charcoal to raise their incomes. At the same time, land degradation often serves to destabilize already vulnerable people. Mark Poffenberger of Community Forestry International said that as forests are destroyed, rural communities dependent on forests for fuel, timber and medicine must spend scarce cash for these items, leading to poverty and haphazard migration to cities. Poor and migrant Cambodians are susceptible to human trafficking and vulnerable to a host of ills which, like HIV infection, are more prevalent in urban areas, he asserted.

Cambodia can't effectively stem these problems until its ecosystems are stabilized, he noted. Finally, indigenous and poor communities are often politically disenfranchised and easily manipulated. Suwanna Gauntlett, Wild Aid Country Director, noted that the poor are often used as fronts by rich and powerful Cambodians to stake claims on environmentally sensitive areas.

Wildlife Trafficking Decentralized but Lucrative

15. (SBU) Activists reported that most wildlife captured in Cambodia is exported to Vietnam, either as a final destination or en route to China. There are no indications that Cambodian wildlife smugglers are also involved in trafficking people, narcotics, or weapons, although environmental leaders suspect that many wildlife smugglers are also involved in smuggling consumer goods like gasoline from Vietnam to Cambodia. These smugglers likely use the same network of corrupt customs agents to facilitate smuggling of both wildlife and more traditional consumer goods. Wildlife smuggling in Cambodia seems to be fairly disorganized and to operate in small networks, environmental leaders noted.

16. (U) While trafficking in reptiles is perhaps most common, several NGO leaders reported a dramatic increase in the trafficking of macaques over the past several months. Gauntlett reported that Wild Aid's wildlife rescue team has confiscated 34,000 animals of various types over the past four years, and is currently uncovering 100-200 smuggled macaques each week. Macaques typically travel in groups of 8-10 individuals, and are worth about USD 80 each locally, making them a lucrative target. Gauntlett relayed an

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incident in which one smuggler, stopped by robbers near the Vietnam border, gladly agreed to give up his motorcycle as long as he was allowed to keep his backpack, which contained five macaques. Pollard noted that smuggling of macaques and other primates leads to deforestation, as it is common for smugglers to clear 100 meters of forest from the area surrounding a tree with a valuable primate so that the primate cannot jump to another tree to escape.

Poor Government Performance Impedes Environmental Efforts

17. (SBU) Environmental protection efforts are often hampered by government inefficiency, lack of political will, and corruption, NGO leaders noted. Teng Seak, Country Director for the World Wildlife Fund, noted that ministries often have difficulty coordinating their work and that decentralization efforts raise doubts about commune councils' ability to assess and respond to environmental concerns. Michelle Owen of Wild Aid noted that sub-decrees (prakas) implementing the Forestry Law were supposed to be issued four years ago, but have been delayed due to bureaucratic in-fighting. As a result, there is no official Cambodian government list of protected species, making prosecution of wildlife trafficking offenses difficult. Finally, economic growth often takes precedence over environmental concerns. Environmental impact assessments for economic development projects are often completely skipped, environmental leaders noted, or when completed are done so poorly as to be useless.

18. (SBU) It is often difficult to determine if government failings are due to government inefficiency or Cambodia's endemic corruption. NGO leaders cited several examples, including conservation efforts of dubious value, successful environmental programs being transferred to other government bodies with no explanation, and failure to respond to NGO requests for information, which suggest government ineptitude at best and corruption at worst.

Comment

¶9. (SBU) Environmental concerns in Cambodia often take a back seat to political and economic issues more pressing to foreign donors and international organizations. In reality, however, environmental issues are inextricably linked with corruption, an inadequate judiciary, and rural poverty which top many international agendas. Wildlife trafficking, land concessions, illegal logging, and land speculation enrich the already wealthy and powerful while further marginalizing the poor. Improving environmental protection, strengthening rule of law, and alleviating poverty should all be seen as part of a "virtuous circle" where improvements in one area help facilitate improvements in the others.

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